

# THE SOCIAL PROBLEM GROUP

## The President's Account of the Society's next Task

By Sir BERNARD MALLET, K.C.B.

IN the year 1931 the *Eugenics Society* can claim to have raised the question of eugenic sterilization from the status of a vague social problem, about which there has been much loose talking and thinking, to a concrete political issue which has received the careful scrutiny of a large number of highly competent persons outside the *Society*. Our policy has been set forth in a pamphlet which has received widespread attention, and has been focused in a bill which was recently introduced into the House of Commons under the ten-minutes rule. Our proposals have been extensively noticed and commented on in the Press, and of the daily and weekly papers which have expressed opinions, the great majority have been favourably disposed. There are now few educated persons throughout the country who do not realize that eugenic sterilization is an active contemporary social issue.

I would suggest that as, in the year 1931, we have drawn public attention to the idea of legalizing eugenic sterilization, so, in the year 1932, we bring before the public the idea of a "Social Problem Group." Such a procedure would be a wholly logical development of our activities this year, in that the ultimate aim of our sterilization policy is not to make the measure compulsory for sufferers from mental defects and diseases, but rather to make it voluntarily practicable by the social problem group, *if such a group exists, as is alleged*. If the group does *not* exist, the useful scope of our sterilization proposals will be restricted.

For a long time this *Society* has inclined towards a belief in the existence of a social problem group as a result of the researches of Mr. E. J. Lidbetter into the relation of heredity and social inadequacy in an East

London area. It is hoped that the first volume of Mr. Lidbetter's book will appear in 1932. This alone should go far to direct public attention to the group. But it is desirable that it should be investigated from other aspects.

I should like to draw the attention of readers of the REVIEW to a way by which they could help the *Society* in such an investigation.

### THE DISCOVERY OF THE GROUP

Since the idea of the existence of this group is new, and since the term is little known, a brief description will be given of how the conception first originated. It arose in connection with a recent investigation of the incidence of mental deficiency in England and Wales in the following way.

The first authoritative pronouncement upon this incidence was delivered by the Royal Commission for the Care and Control of the Feeble-minded which made its report in the year 1909. This *Report* contained certain recommendations relating to the process of "ascertainment" (i.e. to the process by which mentally defective persons are discovered and recognized as a preliminary to being dealt with) which were incorporated in the Mental Deficiency Act of the year 1913. This Act only came into operation at the beginning of August 1914, with the result that during the following four years there was little opportunity for its efficacy to be judged. When, after the War, its workings came under scrutiny, it was found that the process of ascertainment was being inadequately carried out by many Local Authorities. The result was that in the year 1924 an Inter-departmental Committee was jointly appointed by the Boards of Education and Control, whose terms of reference were to estimate how

many mentally defective persons there were in England and Wales, and to make recommendations as to how these persons could best be dealt with. This Committee came to be called the "Mental Deficiency Committee," and by it the conception of a "Social Problem Group" was formulated.

The chief statistical conclusion reached by this Committee was that the incidence of mental deficiency had apparently increased from 4.6 per thousand, as reported by the Royal Commission in 1909, to 8.56 per thousand in 1929, the year in which the report of the Mental Deficiency Committee appeared. That is to say that the incidence had apparently nearly doubled in about twenty years. The total number of mentally defective persons in England and Wales was moreover estimated as 300,000.

The conception of the "Social Problem Group" emerged from an analysis of the types of families by which these three main grades of mental defectives were produced. These three grades have been given legal definitions. The lowest or most defective grade is that of idiocy. Idiots have a "mental age" of up to two, and comprise some five per cent. of all defectives. The middle grade of imbecility comprises persons who, as adults, have a mental age of from two to six, and includes some 20 per cent. of all defectives. Idiots and imbeciles are often collectively referred to as "low grade defectives." The highest grade of mental defective, known as the feeble-minded, has a mental age of from six to eight, and comprises some 75 per cent., or about three quarters, of all defectives. The feeble-minded are sometimes referred to as "high grade defectives." It will thus be seen that from the numerical standpoint alone, feeble-mindedness presents a more important social problem than idiocy and imbecility combined.

## TWO DIFFERENT SORTS OF FAMILIES

When Dr. E. O. Lewis, the investigator of the Mental Deficiency Committee, came to examine the families from which these three grades of mental defectives arose, he made an interesting discovery. He found

that low grade defectives tended to be born of parents who, in most observable respects, differed little or not at all from the average of the population. The feeble-minded group, however, arose from families whose general standard of living was conspicuously below that of the average. His findings are summarized in the following table, which shows the proportions of the three grades of mental defectives found in superior, good, average, poor, and very poor homes.

**Condition of Homes\***

Grade	Superior	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
Feeble-minded	1.2	10.1	27.0	36.5	25.2
Imbeciles	... 5.9	23.7	36.2	19.5	14.7
Idiots	... 9.5	23.0	40.5	21.6	5.4
All grades	... 2.4	13.2	29.3	32.7	22.3

## THE "SUBMERGED TENTH"

Dr. Lewis' procedure when investigating an area for the presence of mental defectives was to apply for information from the various services and organizations which would normally come into touch with defectives. Such were the education authorities, prisons, hospitals, public assistance authorities, relieving officers, and charity organizations. His was then the surprising experience of finding the names of the *same families* given him by several of these different and independent bodies, as in one way or another presenting difficulties and problems. These families, while not necessarily certifiably defective, were composed of sub-normal and low grade persons, who were useless or, in various ways, burdensome to the community, and presented "social problems." From these families, it was found, were recruited the bulk of unemployables, incorrigible slum makers, prostitutes, inebriates, habitual criminals, chronic paupers, and *high grade defectives* that existed in the community. This group was christened the "Social Problem Group," and by the Mental Deficiency Committee it was estimated as comprising about a *tenth of the total population of the country, that*

\* Report of the Mental Deficiency Committee, Part IV, page 202.

is to say, some four million persons. This sweeping and comprehensive estimate was adopted with singularly little comment by a number of eminent authorities among whom is included Sir George Newman, the Chief Medical Officer of the Ministry of Health.

The actual words used by the Report to describe the Social Problem Group are here quoted :

"Let us assume that we could segregate as a separate community all the families in this country containing mental defectives of the primary amentia type. We should find that we had collected among them a most interesting social group. It would include, as everyone who has extensive practical experience of social service would readily admit, a much larger proportion of *insane persons, epileptics, paupers, criminals (especially recidivists), unemployables, habitual slum dwellers, prostitutes, inebriates and other social inefficient*s than would a group of families not containing mental defectives. The overwhelming majority of the families thus collected will belong to that section of the community, which we propose to term the 'social problem' or 'subnormal' group. This group comprises approximately the lowest 10 per cent. in the social scale of most communities. Though the large majority of its members are not so low grade mentally that they can be actually certified as mentally defective, it is possible that a not inconsiderable number of them might prove, if examined by expert and experienced medical practitioners, to be certifiable and subject to be placed under care and control."

The Report also says :

"In point of fact the disparity in the actual as opposed to the potential fertility of the normal and subnormal sections of the population is increasing, the families of the subnormal group remaining as large as hitherto while those of the better social groups are steadily diminishing in size."\*

### A BURDEN OF FOUR MILLION

Surely few more challenging statements than this have ever been uttered by a

Departmental Committee. Four million persons in England and Wales who are the great purveyors of social inefficiency, prostitution, feeble-mindedness and petty crime, the chief architects of slumdom, the most fertile strain in the community! Four million persons in a socially well-defined group forming the dregs of the community and thriving upon it as a parasite thrives upon a healthy and vigorous host. It is difficult to conceive of a more sweeping or socially significant generalization.

In this conception of the "Social Problem Group," the Mental Deficiency Committee has issued a challenge not only to social reformers but to every thinking person in the country. It is a challenge which it would befit a Royal Commission rather than a private society to take up. In so far, however, as the social problem group, if it really exists as is alleged, has a special interest for eugenists, the Council of the *Eugenics Society* has sanctioned the formation of a committee whose aim it will be to make a preliminary investigation of the subject.

### PROPOSED AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The Mental Deficiency Committee has stated that the social problem group contains an unduly large proportion of socially inefficient and burdensome persons who fall into the groups specified in the italicized passage quoted above from the Mental Deficiency Report. These different groups are dealt with by different organized bodies. It is proposed to form as many sub-committees of a Social Problem Investigation Committee as there are special groups, and it will be the aim of these sub-committees to ascertain whether the persons of whom they have cognizance as falling within those groups come of families who are appreciably below the normal social average.

At a preliminary meeting held at the rooms of the *Eugenics Society* on Friday, July 31st, the formation of the following sub-committees was approved, the members of each sub-committee having power to co-opt at their discretion.

\* *Report of the Mental Deficiency Committee, Part III, pp. 80 and 82.*

1. Public Assistance.
2. Mental Disease and Defect.
3. Epileptics.
4. Criminals.
5. Slum Dwellers.
6. Unemployment.
7. Prostitution.
8. Inebriates.
9. Casuals.

The co-operation of persons having special knowledge of these nine groups has been invited. It was surmised that some of these persons might have at their disposal or might be able to obtain access to, records which would go some way to answering the essential question which the Committee has set itself the task of answering—viz. are the families from which the persons comprising these groups tend to come, conspicuously below the general social average?

#### A POSSIBLE BOOK

If sufficient interest can be aroused and if the information obtained is adequate, it might prove possible for the *Society* to produce a small book entitled "The Social Problem Group," consisting of a short introduction and nine subsequent sections dealing with the groups above enumerated.

It is suggested that those Fellows and Members of the *Society* who are interested in this subject and who have the necessary leisure might care to institute investigations of a similar kind in the neighbourhood in which they live. The best procedure for conducting such enquiries is for the person

or group of persons who are mainly interested to form around themselves a small committee (directed, if possible, by an influential chairman) with power to form sub-committees with a view to pursuing the various special investigations. There could be no better way of interesting the residents in a given locality in the principles of eugenics than this. It is possible that the findings may vary from place to place, and it is clearly important that the investigations be conducted in a spirit of disinterested impartiality. For these reasons it is advisable to include on the proposed committee at least one public-spirited person who, while retaining an open mind, is on general principles sceptical of the influence of heredity in determining the various forms of human inadequacy.

The results obtainable by such a small investigation could not be regarded as final. They could not be held definitely to establish or to refute this conception of the existence of a social problem group. But in so far as they would express the views of persons with special knowledge of the constituent elements of this group, they might well serve the purpose of drawing attention to the necessity of instituting a more ambitious and thorough investigation equipped with financial aid—perhaps a Royal Commission.

The General Secretary will be pleased to give what assistance he can to those who contemplate starting such an investigation in the areas in which they live.

